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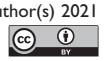

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'What about me?' Stories of the educational experiences of care-experienced children and young people in a Scottish local authority

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Abstract
This qualitative study explores the educational experiences of looked after children and young people in one Scottish local authority. The preoccupations of government are academic achievement and school attendance, but these are not the prime concerns of the children, carers and professionals involved. Moreover, they can be both enhanced and restricted by the background characteristics and care situations of the young people and the responses of schools to their needs and behaviour. Five influential factors emerged from interviews and focus groups with professionals, carers and young people: behaviour; school attendance; carers as educators; friendships; and communication between home and school. Each of them is discussed with extended quotations that convey the voices of participants.

Keywords
Care-experienced children and young people, Scotland, academic achievement, schooling, education of looked after children

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Introduction

In an article reporting attempts to improve the educational experiences of children and young people in care in Scotland, Connelly and Chakrabarti (2008: 359) end with the following words:

> There is a sense of a journey begun but with a long road to travel. Scotland's future as a mature democracy is as much tied to social justice as to its economy. The commitment to improving the educational experience and raising the attainment of a minority of its youth who are in public care represents a significant test of the socially just society.

More than ten years later, the educational experiences and attainments of looked after children continue to be a matter of concern (see Connelly and Furnivall, 2013). This article reconsiders Connelly and Chakrabarti's statement a decade later using evidence gathered in a research project prompted by a kinship carer and executed by a local authority educational psychological service in Scotland. The fundamental question was: what are the educational experiences of care-experienced children and young people in schools in a Scottish local authority?

Children in care in Scotland form approximately one-and-a-half percent of the population aged 0 to 18. Admissions can be voluntary or compulsory and children can live in a variety of family and residential settings. (For details of the Scottish system, see www.celsis.org/our-work/looked-after-children.)

Extensive research has shown that young people who are, or have been, in care, are among the lowest performing groups in terms of educational outcomes internationally (see Connelly and Chakrabarti, 2008; Connelly and Furnivall, 2013; Flynn, Tessier and Coulombe, 2013; Jackson, 1999; Sebba, et al., 2015; Trout, et al, 2008; O'Higgins, Sebba and Gardner, 2017; Welbourne and Leeson, 2012) and that even those who regularly attend school do not always reach their educational potential (Jackson, 1999; Jackson and McParlin, 2006). They also have poorer employment prospects (Hook and Courtney, 2011) and health outcomes (Dixon, 2008) compared with the general population and are over-represented in the homeless (Davison and Burris, 2014) and prison populations (Centre for Social Justice, 2015). Two key Education Scotland documents have sought to address the above concerns: *Looked After Children and Young People: We can and must do better* (2007) and *Count Us In: Improving the education of our looked after children* (2008).

This study will refer to such children and young people as 'care experienced', except when providing quotations, as this term is deemed more respectful of their advocacy and better reflects their experiences.

The research process

The initial impetus for this research was a request from a kinship carer who led a local advocacy group and was deeply concerned about the education that care-experienced children were receiving. The local authority Educational Psychological Service took on the work.

Data collection

Information letters were sent to various stakeholders inviting them to participate in the study. This resulted in 16 focus group discussions and numerous interviews taking place. The interviewers used a list of topics to guide the discussion but were open to the participants' different stories and agendas, enabling the research to 'make space' for what they had to bring. The focus groups comprised people in similar roles, such as kinship and foster carers, residential workers, deputy head teachers in schools, care-experienced young people and guidance teachers. Parents of looked after children who lived at home were excluded as it was felt they required their own research focus. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed.

Reading the data

The interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed and analysed thematically following the methodology developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Patterns were identified and three main themes emerged: identities; academic achievement and schooling; and educators and other professionals. This article focuses on the second of these: academic achievement and schooling and explores five factors associated with it.

Although the results of the research are presented in a linear, sequential manner with compact sections, the ideas are often intertwined and may appear 'messy'. This reflects the reality in which care-experienced young people live. This complexity is illustrated by the quotation below. Educational professionals are advised not to exclude care-experienced pupils and although this can create tensions, those schools that succeed are applauded. Yet this young person gives a different slant:

> ... In high school I was quite a violent child. I really pushed the boundaries to the very limits. I was never expelled. My head teacher knew I was in foster care and used it to stop from excluding me. In a way I was never treated like a normal child. Now I wish they did exclude me because it would have put me in my place, but because they didn't, I just did what I wanted. I could walk out of class and leave school and do anything I want...

Academic achievement and schooling

The local authority where the research was undertaken regularly collects statistical data about pupils' attainment and attendance (see www.gov.scot/collections/childrens-social-work/). This research complements this statistical information by capturing the complex realities of education and the lived experiences of care-experienced children. The five themes that emerged all contribute to this picture. Each will now be discussed in detail.

Behaviour: 'tagged!'

One young boy posed the question in the title of this article, 'What about me?', while attending a school outing with his class. At face value, the outing met the required criteria for inclusive practice. His carer, who had to be present for the boy to be included, recounted that he arrived in a taxi and was constantly accompanied by two adults. The carer laughingly referred to these adults as 'security guards'. When it became clear that he had not been included in the numbers for a packed lunch provided by the school, he poignantly asked

'What about me?'. This example is one of many stories in which clear, albeit inadvertent messages are conveyed to looked after young people. The paradoxical perceptions of their care experience being the same as, and yet different from, most other children highlight the inherent tensions in operationalising an inclusion agenda in schools.

It became clear in the data analysis that the terms used to refer to care-experienced young people serve to 'other' them. They also indicate a particular attitude towards them and expectation of likely behaviour. Terms such as *unsafe, challenging, dangerous, lacking* and *can't have them here* came through very strongly in carers' narratives and serve to link care-experienced young people to their behaviour (see Day, 2017). Perceptions of 'otherness' rest on the assumption of 'sameness' and how close care-experienced children are to the dominant discourse. Similarly, children's behaviour is compared to the notion of the well-behaved child. Unfortunately, this results in care-experienced young people being predominantly seen through the lens of behaviour, with this view taking on a dominant 'master' status in the narratives about them. This means that the vaunted focus on achievement gets swamped by concerns about behaviour. When asked about the educational achievement of young people in care, one carer hastened to clarify:

> We don't even have time to think about that... their behaviour gets them into trouble at school, and then they are excluded and then they don't want to attend because they are in trouble.

Another carer narrative describes a teacher's response to a looked after young person coming back from a lengthy absence – 'the class was a happier place without you' – with the teacher telling the carer that 'all we ever get told is that our kids are challenging, unsafe to be around and dangerous; the school cannot manage them'.

This 'behaviour' identity of looked after children extends outside school. Carers argue that other parents of pupils within the same class or school also assign a 'master status' to behaviour when talking about care-experienced young people. One young person was playing with his friend and ended up holding him by the throat. The other boy's father was talking about this to the foster mother:

> Well, Murray [care-experienced young person] had him by the throat... Well, ye ken what kids like Murray are like. I said, 'What do you mean kids like Murray?'. 'Well, he's not right is he?' he replied. I said, 'What do you mean he is not right?'. That's the perception. I think that is the problem in schools as well... they think when you go in and you are a foster carer and not a parent, it is like an automatic approval to say what they like about that child.

The carer's perception here is that because carers are not the child's biological parent, others see them as not feeling for the young person they look after in the same way as a 'normal' parent. Therefore, they feel free to make uncomplimentary remarks about the child which they would otherwise suppress. This is important because, as Day (2017) reminds us, labelling theory argues that these experiences can accumulate to produce a 'self-fulfilling prophecy'.

This risk of negative labelling extends beyond the classroom into areas like young people's participation in extra-curricular activities. As one boy explained:

> I found it difficult to join things because I was classed as high risk by social work, so I had to go through so much before I was even considered to join, because of all the safety procedures of being in foster care, whereas everyone else could join regardless.

And as a carer confirmed:

> I was in tears at this. It was the nativity play – I was asked to keep him off. He wasn't allowed to take part. 'Nana,' he was telling me, 'I'm going to be a sheep... I'm going to be a sheep.' I says, 'Oh son!'. 'I knows my lines,' he says. 'What's your lines?'. He says, 'Baa!'. I says, 'Oh son, you're some guy!'. Then, it was the last day in the rehearsals. A boy kept agitating him and agitating him. So when it was his turn – his line – he said 'Baaastard!'. He's out... he's out of the play! I cried because of the nativity. Everyone likes to see their bairns in shepherd outfits or sheep outfits. Not Joe. I've not got any photos of that.

Labelling works on the assumption of deficit and the discourse built on it permeated the narratives recounted in the interviews (see Manu, 2018). The child with behavioural difficulties is first identified and then (though not always) the behaviour is 'justified' due to difficult family circumstances. As one educator said:

> I would at times need to give a bit of detail about the young person's family circumstances for the teachers to understand the child's behaviour... 'Some of these kids have got real difficulties going on; just be mindful of what's happening, give them slack'. I don't mean slack in terms of letting them do whatever they want; just be mindful if they do not have a book or a pencil... just be mindful it's because last night was chaos.

One educator made the point that it is essential to see through behaviour to view the young person as an individual:

> ... young persons often have a reputation before they come to high school and some teachers just see the poor behaviour in class and deal with that first. Other teachers see through that and see that he is a good kid.

School attendance

> Sorry, you're quite lucky I'm here today. (Young person)

> Most of the contact I have with school is in relation to keeping him in school... (Carer)

School attendance is an important criterion on which a school's care for its children is judged (Scottish Government, 2018). Getting the children to school and ways of doing this are high on the agenda of most meetings about care-experienced young people. As one carer put it: 'A minimum entitlement for looked after children is not what they learn but often that they attend, even if for a short period of time.' But the issue is more complex than physical presence. For example, in some of the discussions, the key question of student attainment was raised but was noticeable by the lack of time devoted to addressing it. There were individual success stories, but more attention was given to the struggles that young people faced in trying to thrive. One young person's care placement ended due to lack of resources, resulting in him returning home, thus changing him from a high achiever to a non-attender. 'He's got the same CAT [Cognitive Abilities Test] scores as my daughter, but

they're not having the same life,' an educator explained, lamenting how the changed care circumstances were affecting his engagement and drive. Davey and Pithouse (2008: 65) showed that care-experienced children with stable care placements tended to have good attendance at school and achieve more positive results in standardised attainment tests. However, despite his early promise, the young man in question will almost certainly opt to leave school at the first opportunity to seek employment so that he can gain independence earlier:

> Even with the amount of schooling he's missed, he's still in the top set for Maths and in the top set for English. However, staff have had to set their attainment expectations for him lower, not because of his academic ability, but because of how much schooling he's missed. Whereas he should be a student who should be sitting for Highers and advanced Highers. (Educator)

While learning remains a priority for Education Scotland (Scottish Government, 2010), the following quotations describe the difficult balancing act facing teachers on a daily basis:

> Teachers are trying to keep standards up, quite rightly, so they will challenge you. 'Cause imagine if they were to say, 'It's okay, no need to bother.' It's trying to get the message to them [young people] as well, but at the same time it's trying to get the message that the pencil [lack of] is not the end of the world. Come on. It's hard to find that balance. And you know some of these kids can be doing a topic that can set them off, so it's trying to... you can't cover everything... but trying to make things easier. (Educator)

> ... I think the problem is that the school are trying really hard to deal with her but she's not actually getting education. They're very good at nurturing her... They are containing her. She's not actually doing any education at all. They're probably not pushing her because they care about her. You can see how much they care about her and they want to help her, so then they're not pushing the education onto her because they don't want to upset her. Kind of tiptoeing round her. (Educator)

Several carers mentioned the word 'expectations' in the interviews. They saw the need for adaptation to structures and compliance to regulations but were firm in their opinion that while learning was available for young people, the problem was getting them to take advantage of it. They knew that high expectations lead to higher attainment and stressed that such expectations were more enabling than stressful for the young people. One described how he had been asked to monitor a boy's use of social media and despite holding several conversations with him about the expectation that he would go on to college after the age of 16, found himself dismayed at reading a communication from an older sister that assumed he would not pursue further education but look for a job.

We will highlight four further issues that emerged from the data mentioned in relation to *being present in school*. These will be discussed in the light of the claims of Masschelein and Simons (2015: 86) that being in school suspends the 'so-called natural, unequal order' and establishes a time and space that is 'in a sense detached and separated from the time and space of both society and the household'. Therefore, being present in schools should allow for equality and equity to be enacted for care-experienced youngsters. In other words, schools can be an equalising factor for them and play a major role in the promotion of social justice in society.

Part-time timetables

Numerous carers explained that the young people in their care are on part-time timetables; these range from attending school a few days a week to an hour a day. Some told of how it is very difficult for these young people to resume full-time attendance. In the words of one carer: 'It's like they give up.' But others saw the arrangement as a blessing:

> He's on a reduced timetable right now. I was lucky to get him in school three times these two weeks. He was in the office this morning... He is clearly saying, 'I cannot cope' to us.

It is important when considering this situation to question what is actually happening while the young person is on the school premises. One of the focus groups was interrupted by a phone call from the school of a participant's granddaughter to inform her that the girl was not coming to her classes. This immediately diverted attention to what happens when they do attend. What learning is taking place? How much of the young person's time is spent on tasks that constitute the core of the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence, namely literacy, numeracy and well-being? Carers made the following comments:

> It is so soul-destroying when you look at it. We had a girl, when we go for meetings we get told that she's capable of reaching National Fives and Highers. Of course, she did not want to attend school. The school agreed to have her for an hour a day and that consisted of dance, PE, art, music, so that at the moment she is working below her level.

> ... playing Minecraft in the first three years at school – he could have done that at home. They failed him in primary.

> When he was on a reduced timetable, most of the time he was going about carrying books or feeding the fish tank. He wasn't actually learning anything... He mentioned something like the soft playroom – he goes there for 20 minutes every day for about six months. I agree that you put him in there during a topic where he does not need to be in, but don't put him in there in the middle of Maths or literacy. You need to know this. What is he missing out on?

Time-outs and exclusions

> ... they were unofficially excluded, because the kids we work with should not be excluded from school, so we had these informal arrangements where the school say that until we have a meeting in three days' time, they can't come in. That's an exclusion. Yeah. It's just that they don't call it that. (Carer)

> They called me, asking, 'Has he had his medication this morning? The head teacher was wondering if you'd take him home.' 'It's 9.20am. I'll take him home at 3.15pm', I replied. (Carer)

As touched upon earlier, some care-experienced young people have issues with behaviour regulation in schools. It has been made clear in various documents (see Scottish Government, 2003) that challenging behaviour is seen to be detrimental to children's safety

and to the positive learning and teaching environment of the whole school. Therefore, a decision to exclude a pupil may be taken to safeguard the rights of all pupils to learn and enable staff to teach without fear or disruption. While there is a collective emphasis on challenging behaviour, the onus of maintaining positive conduct in schools is perceived as a responsibility that pupils and their parents must share. Here, the interaction between the collective and the individual is at play and while the individual may be seen to influence the collective, the influence of the collective on the individual does not seem to garner the same recognition.

In the opening quotation in this section, the carer mentions that the young person 'should not be excluded from school'. This was repeated by many carers. Yet there is no legal or policy document stating that a care-experienced young person cannot be excluded. What the *Exclusion from Schools in Scotland: Guidance to education authorities* document (Scottish Government, 2003: 8) highlights is that 'education authorities, when deciding whether exclusion is necessary, must have regard to the particular facts and circumstances surrounding individual incidents and/or pupils'. It also emphasises that (p.15):

> Social work services should always be informed of a decision to exclude... and as far as possible, provision put in place to ensure the ongoing monitoring of the welfare of the child, as well as provision for their educational needs as described in the child's Care Plan.

The facts and the circumstances of the care experienced by the young person are weighed against his or her actions and behaviour. This is not always reflected in the experiences of some carers:

> ... when things go wrong, they exclude too quickly. There is supposed to be the deal that looked after children are not supposed to be excluded but it still happens. And it still happens far too regularly. Some schools, we get the feeling that they don't lose any opportunity to get them out because they are so difficult. (Carer)

Some young people said that they thought that being excluded seemed inevitable: '... to the point where young people are saying just exclude me... that's what happened in my last school, that's what happens...' For young people, exclusion was also a way out of being in school. If the experience of being in school was negative, then getting excluded was an effective strategy to escape.

Provisions and alternatives in mainstream schooling

A recurring theme concerned the space where schooling should take place. A controversial article by Rees (2010) studied alternative provisions in the public and independent education sectors and while his focus was on foster placements, his underlying argument is relevant to this theme. He showed that the focus is mostly on how 'effective' (p. 327) the provision is, recalling Tony Blair's (2007) comment that 'What matters is what works'. Efficacy, what works and elements of performativity (that the input is measured through the output it produces) are the driving forces. This was very much present throughout the data as we demonstrate below.

Many carers and educators raised issues of funding and resources in schools. As one carer put it, 'If they've not got the resources, they've not got the resources.' Some questioned the

presumption of mainstream schooling for looked after children which is a driving force in discussions about the wider 'normalisation' agenda (Florian, 2019; Scottish Government, 2019). Concerns were therefore raised regarding the availability of alternative placements when mainstream ones are deemed too challenging:

> There doesn't seem to be any alternative. The choices are either mainstream… if you are not coping in mainstream there's Pathway for Success [alternative programme]. And if that is not an option there isn't really anything. (Carer)

Some carers claimed that mainstream school can be a very difficult place for both carers and the young people:

> Harris is at the provision school. He has a full-time placement. Most of the kids are part-time but he's got a full-time placement this year. That is where we are at the moment. It seems to be going well… I'm not getting a phone call every five minutes.
>
> *Interviewer:* Did you get a phone call every five minutes?
>
> Yes, when we were at mainstream school it was very difficult. (Carer)

Once a child is placed at an alternative provision suitable for their needs, the story changes:

> I think we kind of relieve pressure, by having an educational package up here, where they're not gonna get constant phone calls. I think what we do for the carers is relieve the pressure that they have on childcare and stuff, 'cause as soon as a school implements a part-time timetable, they're relying on parents and carers to be able to manage that, or for them to get support from other places. (Educator)

But despite this calming effect, some carers were sceptical about the teaching and learning carried out in alternative settings and that not enough was being covered in core subjects:

> …most of them are in the alternative setting where there are learning support community hubs. That's where the kids are, and it is difficult for us to keep track of what academic subjects they actually are in, which one is taught in the alternative setting, which subjects they are actually not taking, and how to support them even with basic English and Maths that every child is supposed to be able to do. And that's not always true: sometimes they do no English or Maths. (Carer)

On the other hand, the educators argued that whatever the gains and losses, these alternative settings are a critical support for some young people:

> If a child was not up to Maths 3, we went to the professionals and we asked for Maths 2 documents so that we can keep him within our school, because they are part of our school, we want them to be and they want to be here. Once upon a time that child might not have stayed in school. The nurture base I think has been particularly helpful with this… it's like night and day … the students are very focused. (Educator)

Homework

The question of whether homework aids academic achievement is still very much debated internationally (Núñez, et al., 2015). In addition, there are very few studies of homework in relation to care-experienced young people (Evans, et al., 2017; Leve and Chamberlain, 2007). However, it is generally accepted that the role of parents, as well as their teachers, is very significant in its successful completion.

> Like everything else in life, it depends on the individual teacher. Someone could explain it really well and you think, 'I've got it' or someone could be just like 'that's how you do it' . . . that's just life. (Carer)

Homework raises specific issues for care-experienced young people as it is a medium that links home and school. Failure to do it often causes problems at home, to be exposed in school, as explanations for its lack of completion are sought:

> I didn't have a computer. Get shouted out for not doing my homework. It's what actually happens. Get shouted out for not having a pencil. 'Sorry, you're quite lucky I'm here today. I'll bring a pencil next time.' (Young person)

> . . . homework – that's down to teachers, I suppose. We say 'they might not have a computer at home; they might not have internet'. . . highlighting to teachers that they might miss homework 'cause. . . or I'll send a wee note saying they've not got uniform today because they've had to stay at auntie's last night because Granny's unwell or Mum wasn't right or. . . (Educator)

Difficulties in completing homework do not solely rest with the young people but extend to their carers. Some carers find homework difficult to manage, while others see it as an opportunity to connect with the young person:

> *Carer A*: Academically they get treated like the other ones and maybe that's the fairest way. I'm dead against homework. Can't get Kieran to do it.
> *Carer B*: Ollie will just not do it.
> *Carer C*: We do what we can do.
> *Carer A*: When they give you a project to do in Primary 3, make a Viking longboat, I made a Viking longboat. I've made a Roman chariot.
> *Carer C*: They just sit back and let you get on with it.
> *Carer A*: Kieran loved the Roman project and I loved making that shield with him. It's also you're spending time with them. I think all homework should be like that.

One school described mechanisms for supporting young people with their homework. Break time or times instead of lessons are used to support homework in core areas:

> . . . but they've got plenty of opportunities at school. Every department makes lunchtime available so they can go along at lunch to be helped. If we know a couple of kids are really struggling, we can use core periods like RE and stuff. They can go to Support for Learning, to the alternative provision or nurture base. Give them some time to catch up stuff, because we know it can be quite difficult at home, so we try to support them that way . . . (Educator)

Some schools also support carers in understanding homework and how it is to be done. Leve and Chamberlain (2007) found that care-experienced girls who are supported are more likely to engage with homework. But one obstacle can be the age difference between young people and their carers which highlights the contrast between past and present styles of education. For this carer, the teacher 'was absolutely right what he said 'cause now I say to Kyle, I say "I didn't learn it that way, you explain it to me," and when he does, he has to actually figure it out himself.' Some schools also offer direct support to carers:

> Because as a parent it is very difficult to keep up with education and understand the changes, the school immediately said that they had a support system where they could talk to you about the curriculum and they invite people into the school. Within that we had two sets of parents and a grandfather. If this chap is coming to you in the weekend, you could help out with the homework, so I think that is maybe not in the minority... (Educator)

Carers as educators

One of the main concerns of many carers is that they have to act as educators when young people are at home, One recounted:

> I ask for work (when he has a reduced timetable or is excluded). What I usually get told is that the guidance teacher has to gather the work from other teachers and it will not be ready until... well, it could be a couple of days. So they are relying on me to provide the educational work. I am not a trained teacher. It is very difficult to gauge the stage of development the child is working or where their understanding is because there is a massive difference between an access English or a Nat 4 for English, a massive difference...

There are two issues at play here: one is the 'not knowing' of the carers and the other the inability to support the child educationally (Maclean and Gunion, 2003: 25). A sense of helplessness and unfairness was expressed. One carer pointed out that the work she was doing was praised by other professionals in a multi-agency meeting and this led to a suggestion that home schooling could become part of an education plan where the young person stays at home for a few hours a week and that this counts towards his or her educational entitlement.

> Then because we are doing that and we have some success, we go to meetings and all of a sudden it's been turned into: 'Oh well, you have been having success so that's now going to be in the educational package.' And you kind of go, 'Wooaah, hang on a minute, that's not how it started and also I am not a teacher...' We see this written into the young person's plan! (Carer).

Friendships

One common observation made by both carers and young people was that care-experienced young people tend to have very limited or no friendships and that bullying is a frequent problem:

> Very few have friends within school. They come back and they tell you that they have been bullied more than anything, and that is the reason why they walked out of class. (Carer)

> A group of peers in the playground are saying to a looked after boy, 'You've not got a mum, you've just got a fat granny who cannae play football!' (Carer).

The playground can be a threatening space for care-experienced young people, particularly in primary schools where clubs, support systems and private spaces are fewer than in high schools. Moreover, life challenges experienced by such young people can make it additionally difficult for them to initiate and maintain friendships (McClung and Gayle, 2010). Many carers questioned the support available in schools for the social needs of their young people: 'Have teachers done something to support these children to have friendships?' (Carer).

Furthermore, other features of the care arrangements and their 'waif' status place children at a disadvantage in this respect:

> . . . if the girls, when they were younger, if they were at school and one of their class pals had a birthday, the parents [the biological parents and not the carer] say, 'That's my wee kid; I'll decide if they're going to the party', especially if the party takes place in contact time. My granddaughter was sitting in the hall at a party, crying her eyes out, and, when asked why by another parent, why she was crying, she said, 'because, although I'm enjoying myself, I soon have to leave to go to my dad's'. It was a case where it was the parent's decision. (Carer)

> . . . he never really went to any parties. There is a little girl he played with really nicely, Emma. He played with her all morning in the cul-de-sac. He came over saying 'Emma has something on'. Next thing you see parents going to her house, her whole class at her house at her party, and he was looking out his window and saw his school friends and was realising Emma didn't invite him.
>
> *Interviewer:* And do you know her parents?
>
> Aye, I know them to speak to. But they did not say anything about the party. They obviously didn't want him there; if they said, 'Could he come and could you stay?', I would stay. (Carer)

Many carers and educators pointed out that the attention-seeking behaviour of many deprived children leads them to befriend the 'wrong' people:

> . . . a majority of them seek out certain kids. One girl in particular needs a lot of attention and she gets it from the wrong places. So, we've got quite a few behavioural difficulties with that girl because she gets attention from the kids that like to cause bother. And she thinks that's positive, but you try to explain to her that that's not good. But she's finding it really difficult because she's been in care, now she's back at Granny's. Granny's trying to support her but she's getting her friends' attention, so. . . (Educator)

As a defence against social isolation, many young people hide the fact that they are in care from peers:

> My friends never ever knew I was in care. (Young person)

> See that's why I never went cause none of my friends knew. They knew nothing about them. I refused to let my foster parents go to parents' night, cause none of my friends knew that I was in foster care. (Young person)

One major frustration surrounded play dates and sleepovers. They all laughed when this was raised:

> Play dates! What, when your friends have to be police checked?! It never got there. All my friends were police checked, and their families. If anyone in their family had a criminal record, then I wasn't allowed to go. And once you're there, you're not allowed to leave the garden. So I didn't go. Parents were like, 'What's wrong with her? Why does she need us police checked? What's she done? What's happening there?' 'Cause I had told everyone I lived with my auntie and uncle. (Young person)

It must be noted that police checks are no longer a necessary procedure for a play date. Carers are encouraged to apply the same checks as they would for their own children.

Communication between home and school

> I strongly believe that relationship with the school is important. Because that completes the picture... (Carer)

These are the words of a carer on being asked about school–home communication. They emphasise that it is not just that school and home need to support each other but that their relationship completes the picture of young people and their educational journey. Communication was thus universally considered to be an essential part of the relationship. But further investigation revealed an assumption that 'the school', 'the carers' and 'the residential unit' are separate and unified entities whereas they comprise a host of subsidiary units and individuals – schools have houses, departments and teaching units and a great number of individuals work in them. This resulted in participants offering numerous examples of when communications did not reach the relevant people despite systems being in place.

All schools scrutinised have online communication systems where information is regularly uploaded onto websites and sent to parents and carers by email, social media, text messages and circulars. The following quotation from an educator provides a good example of how school–home communication actually works:

> We're trying to look at who's taking part in the activities and try and match it up with the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation... we're trying to make sure that every pupil has the opportunity to take part. So we're quite good at texting out 'there's this on this week' and we've got a school app... or we send out emails to parents or carers. It's a blanket email sent to all saying, for example, that we introduced new lunch clubs just two months ago. So that email goes to every person that's on our school record, and it was updated on the app and on twitter. So, we'd like to think we're getting it covered... but it's something we've recognised and would like to tighten up on. (Educator)

Nevertheless, it was evident that workers in residential homes and some kinship carers find communication with text messages and emails problematic, because they have neither the means nor the time to access them:

> Communication with school could be really bad. Because most communication with schools comes through text message and we do not have any mobile phones; letters are given to kids, but our kids never get letters in. (Carer)

> Unless it is on the website or we have our own children attending that school or letter posted to here, we don't get to know. We did not know that a blazer was going to be required, but a woman whose children attend the same school works with me and the subject came up in passing...

Some educators, however, mentioned that schools are making efforts to phone parents and carers, checking, for instance, whether an allocated appointment is convenient or confounded by practical problems. But some admitted that certain parents of looked after children are hard to reach:

> There would just be one mobile number which would have no answering service, the landline is disconnected, a letter is sent but never received and a recorded letter sent but nobody knows where that's gone. (Educator)

An extra complication arises when carers start looking after a young person in the middle of a school year. This can result in them having limited knowledge of how the school works and what supports it offers. Some new carers found it very difficult to access basic information:

> I feel like I know virtually nothing about the school. In the school newsletter there are dates and I highlight them. But some things are just known. I don't feel that the school have an understanding that I am lacking the knowledge because Ken started later.

Timing also seems to be highly significant for communication between home and school. Sometimes there are issues that cannot wait and delays have repercussions for the young person's functioning within school. The following story illustrates this:

> Our granddaughter's dad was imprisoned and this also attracted the press who came to our home. How do you tell the granddaughter that something happened? There is victim support but no support for the family of the culprit. The hardest bit was trying to notify the school. It was closed over Christmas. As soon as it opened, I phoned the office to get an appointment but was not given one till 3pm, by which point several kids had had a go at my granddaughter because of what happened. The school offered support through counselling, but it's taken time and some of the damage would have been prevented if I could have spoken to the school about it earlier. (Carer)

It is inevitable that the living situations of care-experienced children complicate communication, although many other children will come from disrupted and reconstituted families, and although schools try to cope with this, information often gets lost in the system and it is often difficult for them to know who should receive the communication:

> There was a meeting at school – one of the other parents complained because there wasn't anybody there for him, but we genuinely didn't know anything about this meeting. (Carer)

> At parents' evening, the young person's mum comes, so they ignore me, his gran even though they know I am bringing the child up, they talk to the mother. (Kinship carer)

A further complication arises from the legal and social situations of looked after children. Young people, birth parents and carers are not always in agreement regarding key issues and it is sometimes difficult for professionals to know whether to base a decision on the expressed wish of the young person or to defer to carer's requests or legal requirements. The following example highlights that this tension can arise in seemingly minor situations, such as selection for work experience offered in schools:

> They put him down as not having difficulties with his eyes – he's going to be working in a garage. They didn't know he had an eyesight problem – I was quite angry with that. I want to make sure the right information is there. But I was told, 'Samuel was so desperate to get on the transport programme, I thought... bending the rules'. I said, 'Dinnae think – check with me!'. (Carer)

Overall, carers felt that communication with schools tended to be 'school focused' in that it rotates around issues that have a direct consequence for them. When the young people seem settled, communication stops or is limited, and carers facing problems at home feel unsupported:

> I'm made to feel bad about going into school and speaking about his behaviour at home. They seem uninterested. Very short. 'He's fine here.' I think it's important that we have this relationship. But I was told 'the problem is not at school'. (Carer)

Conclusion

This study shows that many of the issues raised by Connelly and Chakrabarti more than ten years ago remain salient. It emphasises that worthy ambitions of attainment and attendance are not necessarily echoed by parents, carers and young people and are thwarted by a variety of factors. In addition, seemingly minor problems can disrupt plans because they are important in the daily lives of those involved and are symbolic of much wider issues. The research sought to incorporate these dimensions by empathising with the frustrations expressed by the various participants and seeking to view the individual narratives in the context of wider societal challenges, acknowledging the heightened significance for care-experienced children and carers of seemingly small injustices.

This research clearly shows that the educational 'journey' experienced by looked after children is tenuous and complex. It is not linear and is characterised by uncertainties and compromises. Nevertheless, all is not bleak because what schools do to overcome the problems described is important but at the moment effectiveness is hampered by variations and inconsistencies in practice.

Given this situation, three additional conclusions can be drawn.

- The narratives indicate that if the adults (in particular professionals) and schools were to do a little more, we could make education work for care-experienced young people; but on the other hand, the narratives also indicate ongoing deeper challenges. Resources (or

lack thereof) are often cited but this argument is baseless without a clear policy on how far school structures should bend in order to keep children in mainstream education.
- Care-experienced children and young persons are included and excluded at the same time. Their physical presence in school does not in itself imply a sense of belonging to that school community.
- Schools and educational professionals struggle with the tension of wanting to include children presenting challenging behaviour but also wanting to cater for the majority of children who are engaging more with learning. A range of provision is needed to make this less of an either/or decision.

Many of the educational journeys described indicate a bumpy ride and the complexities of the issues discussed in this article need continual attention and care. Trying and re-trying are part of the commitment to social justice. There are still weaknesses but there has been much progress that must be acknowledged. As a carer pointed out:

> He's not touchy feely but when we went to the open day he walked in and was high fiving one of the leaders and it was natural. Just great to see. This council is getting a lot right. Please don't think they're getting it all wrong.

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